

United States District Court
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
SHERMAN DIVISION

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| UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, | § | |
| | § | Case No. 4:19-cr-183 |
| v. | § | Judge Mazzant |
| | § | |
| CHRISTOPHER LAMARR STERKES | § | |

MEMORANDUM OPINION AND ORDER

Pending before the Court is Defendant's Motion for Compassionate Release Pursuant to 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) (Dkt. #45). Having considered the Motion, the relevant pleadings, and the applicable law, the Court finds that the Motion should be **DENIED**.

BACKGROUND

On August 14, 2019, a Grand Jury indicted Defendant Christopher Lamarr Sterkes for Possession of a Firearm by a Drug User in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(3) (Count 1) and Possession of a Firearm in Furtherance of a Drug Trafficking Crime in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1) (Count 2) (Dkt. #43 at p. 1). Defendant pleaded guilty to both Counts (Dkt. #34). On August 19, 2019, the Court sentenced Defendant to a total term of imprisonment of 144 months (24 months for Count 1 and 120 months for Count 2 to be served consecutively) (Dkt. #43 at p. 2). On February 21, 2023, Defendant filed a Motion and Memorandum with this Court seeking compassionate release (Dkt. #45). He subsequently filed a Supplemental Motion on June 9, 2023 (Dkt. #46). On December 9, 2024, Defendant filed his Supplement Motion for Compassionate Release (Dkt. #49). Defendant then filed a Motion for Expedited Consideration on January 13, 2025 (Dkt. #46; Dkt. #50). The Government responded to Defendant's Motion on January 23, 2025 (Dkt. #51). Defendant filed a Reply on May 21, 2025 (Dkt. #53).

LEGAL STANDARD

I. 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A)

A judgment of conviction imposing a sentence of imprisonment “‘constitutes a final judgment’ and may not be modified by a district court except in limited circumstances.” *Dillon v. United States*, 560 U.S. 817, 824 (2010) (quoting 18 U.S.C. § 3582(b)). “Often referred to as ‘compassionate release,’ § 3582(c)(1)(A) embodies a rare exception to a conviction’s finality.” *United States v. Wilson*, No. 1:07-CR-236-MAC-CLS-1, 2024 WL 4267923, at *3 (E.D. Tex. Sept. 23, 2024). The statute gives the Court discretion, under certain circumstances, to reduce a defendant’s term of imprisonment. *Id.* The First Step Act of 2018, in part, states:

- (A) the court, upon motion of the Director of the Bureau of Prisons [(“BOP”)], or upon motion of the defendant after the defendant has fully exhausted all administrative rights to appeal a failure of the [BOP] to bring a motion on the defendant’s behalf or the lapse of 30 days from the receipt of such a request by the warden of the defendant’s facility, whichever is earlier, may reduce the term of imprisonment (and may impose a term of probation or supervised release with or without conditions that does not exceed the unserved portion of the original term of imprisonment), after considering the factors set forth in section 3553(a) to the extent that they are applicable, if it finds that—
 - (i) extraordinary and compelling reasons warrant such a reduction; or
 - (ii) the defendant is at least 70 years of age, has served at least 30 years in prison, pursuant to a sentence imposed under section 3559(c), for the offense or offenses for which the defendant is currently imprisoned, and a determination has been made by the Director of the [BOP] that the defendant is not a danger to the safety of any other person or the community, as provided under section 3142(g);

and that such a reduction is consistent with applicable policy statements issued by the Sentencing Commission

Pub. L. No. 115-391, 132 Stat. 5194, codified as 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A).¹

Instead of defining “extraordinary and compelling reasons,” Congress delegated its authority to the United States Sentencing Commission (“Commission”) to define the term. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 994(t) (directing the Commission to “describe what should be considered extraordinary and compelling reasons for sentence reduction, including the criteria to be applied and a list of specific examples”); *see also Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *3 (collecting cases); *United States v. Jean*, 108 F.4th 275, 278 (5th Cir. 2024). “Although the Commission issued a policy statement prior to the passage of the [First Step Act] that described the reasons that qualify as extraordinary and compelling, that policy statement referenced only those motions filed by the Director of the [Bureau of Prisons]” *Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *3. Accordingly, the Fifth Circuit held that the policy statement was inapplicable to motions filed by defendants on their own behalf. *United States v. Shkambi*, 993 F.3d 388, 393 (5th Cir. 2021).

This changed on November 1, 2023, when the amendments to the United States Sentencing Guidelines (“Guidelines”) became effective. The Commission amended the Guidelines to extend the applicability of the policy statement set forth in U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13 to defendant-filed motions and to broaden the scope of what qualifies as “extraordinary and compelling” reasons potentially warranting compassionate release. *Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *4 (citing U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13). Section 1B1.13(b), as amended, identifies six categories of circumstances that may qualify as “extraordinary and compelling.” U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b). The categories are: (1) the medical circumstances of the defendant; (2) the age of the defendant; (3) the

¹ This provision is often referred to as “compassionate release.” *See Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *3 (citing *United States v. Escajeda*, 58 F.4th 184, 186 (5th Cir. 2023)).

family circumstances of the defendant; (4) whether the defendant was a victim of abuse while in custody; (5) other reasons similar in gravity to those previously described; and (6) an unusually long sentence. *Id.* § 1B1.13(b)(1)–(6). Notably, rehabilitation alone is insufficient to grant a defendant’s motion for compassionate release. *Jean*, 108 F.4th at 279.

II. Exhaustion of Administrative Remedies

Section 3582(c)(1)(A) states that the Court may not grant a defendant’s motion for compassionate release unless the defendant has complied with the administrative exhaustion requirement. *Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *4 (citing 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A); *United States v. Garrett*, 15 F.4th 335, 337 (5th Cir. 2021); *United States v. Franco*, 973 F.3d 465, 467 (5th Cir. 2020)).² That is, a defendant may not seek relief from a court before first exhausting each administrative avenue available to the defendant. *See Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *4. “Accordingly, before seeking relief from the [C]ourt, a defendant must first submit a request to the warden of his facility to move for compassionate release on his behalf and then either exhaust his administrative remedies or wait for the lapse of 30 days after the warden received the request.” *Id.* (citing 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A)).

This exhaustion requirement is a “mandatory claim-processing rule,” which means a defendant may not waive it himself. *Franco*, 973 F.3d at 468; *see also United States v. Rivas*, 833 F. App’x 556, 558 (5th Cir. 2020) (“Because the statutory language is mandatory . . . we must enforce this procedural rule”). However, that is not to say the exhaustion requirement can never be waived. Section 3582(c)’s exhaustion requirement is a claim-processing rule—not a

² The exhaustion requirement applies regardless of whether the motion is styled as one for compassionate release or merely for a sentence reduction under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A). *Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *4.

jurisdictional prerequisite. *Ward v. United States*, 11 F.4th 354, 361 (5th Cir. 2021). Thus, like other claim-processing rules, “the Government must properly raise the rule before it will be enforced.” *Id.* (cleaned up); *see also Fort Bend Cnty., Tex. v. Davis*, 139 S. Ct. 1843, 1849 (2019) (cleaned up and citations omitted) (“A claim-processing rule may be ‘mandatory’ in the sense that a court must enforce the rule if a party properly raises it . . . But an objection based on a mandatory claim-processing rule may be forfeited if the party asserting the rule waits too long to raise the point.”). In turn, if the Government does not invoke the exhaustion requirement, the Court will deem the matter waived for the purposes of a defendant’s motion under § 3582(c)(1)(A). *See Ward*, 11 F.4th at 361; *see also United States v. McLean*, No. 21-40015, 2022 WL 44618, at *1 (5th Cir. Jan. 5, 2022) (finding abuse of discretion where the failure to exhaust administrative remedies was raised *sua sponte*).

III. U.S.S.G.’s Policy Statement

A. Defendant’s medical circumstances (U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(1))

The Sentencing Commission has enumerated four separate medical circumstances to consider in evaluating a compassionate release request. U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(1)(A)–(D). First, whether the Defendant is “suffering from a terminal illness (*i.e.*, a serious and advanced illness with an end-of-life trajectory).” *Id.* § 1B1.13(b)(1)(A). Although a life-expectancy prognosis is not required, the provided examples make clear how serious the illness must be: “metastatic solid-tumor cancer, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), end-stage organ disease, and advanced dementia.” *Id.* Fifth Circuit precedent is in accord. *See, e.g., United States v. McMaryion*, No. 21-50450, 2023 WL 4118015, at *2 (5th Cir. June 22, 2023) (per curiam) (“We have said that a late-stage, terminal prognosis can constitute an extraordinary and compelling basis for a § 3582(c)(1) motion.”). Generic conditions like hypertension or high cholesterol are insufficient. *See, e.g., United States v.*

Thompson, 984 F.3d 431, 434 (5th Cir. 2021) (finding neither hypertension nor high cholesterol to be terminal conditions); *United States v. Koons*, 455 F. Supp. 3d 285, 291–92 (W.D. La. 2020) (similar, but for high cholesterol, hypertension, and acid reflux).

Second, whether the defendant is “(i) suffering from a serious physical or medical condition, (ii) suffering from a serious functional or cognitive impairment, or (iii) experiencing deteriorating physical or mental health because of the aging process.” U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(1)(B). This condition must be so severe that it “substantially diminishes the ability of the defendant to provide self-care within the environment of a correctional facility and from which he or she is not expected to recover.” *Id.* When the defendant’s conditions are “‘managed effectively by medication’ and do not ‘substantially diminish the ability of the defendant to provide self-care,’” the defendant’s medical condition is not an “extraordinary and compelling reason[] warranting compassionate release” *United States v. Love*, 853 F. App’x 986, 987 (5th Cir. 2021) (quotations omitted).

Third, whether the Defendant is “suffering from a medical condition that requires long-term or specialized medical care that is not being provided and without which the defendant is at risk of serious deterioration in health or death.” U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(1)(C). This subcategory focuses on the lack of resources and medical care available in some correctional facilities. Courts have found insufficient general complaints about long-term issues without medical proof of the condition or how it is deteriorating. *See, e.g., United States v. Ani*, No. 21-00147, 2024 WL 50775, at *4 (D. Haw. Jan. 4, 2024) (“BOP is providing him with medical care, such as medication. There is no evidence that his medical conditions are deteriorating; that his medical conditions require long-term or specialized medical care that is not being provided and without which he is at risk of

serious deterioration in health or death; or that his ability to care for himself has been seriously diminished.”); *United States v. Dessauere-Outlaw*, No. CR 122-023, 2024 WL 83327, at *2 (S.D. Ga. Jan. 8, 2024) (finding general complaints about surgery complication and diabetes insufficient).

Fourth, whether the defendant is in a facility that is “at imminent risk of being affected by (I) an ongoing outbreak of infectious disease, or (II) an ongoing public health emergency declared by the appropriate federal, state, or local authority.” U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(1)(D)(i). In addition, the defendant’s “personal health risk factors and custodial status” must put them “at increased risk of suffering severe medical complications or death” *Id.* § 1B1.13(b)(1)(D)(ii). The facility must also be unable to “adequately mitigate[]” the defendant’s increased risk “in a timely manner.” *Id.* § 1B1.13(b)(1)(D)(iii).

Courts have repeatedly denied motions related to the COVID-19 pandemic under this section.³ In fact, the Fifth Circuit has “repeatedly denied relief in cases where prisoners sought compassionate release due to fear of communicable disease, even when those prisoners were in poor health.” *McMaryion*, 2023 WL 4118015, at *2 (citing *Thompson*, 984 F.3d at 432–34 (5th Cir. 2021) (denying relief to a hypertensive stroke survivor concerned by COVID-19)); *see also United States v. Rodriguez*, 27 F.4th 1097, 1098–1101 (5th Cir. 2022) (denying relief where movant fearing COVID-19 suffered from heart failure). Indeed, “the mere existence of COVID-19 in society and the possibility that it may spread to a particular prison alone cannot independently justify compassionate release” *United States v. Raia*, 954 F.3d 594, 597 (3d Cir. 2020); *see also Koons*,

³ *See, e.g., United States v. Blair*, No. 5:19-CR-50058, 2023 WL 8223470, at *3 (W.D. Ark. Nov. 6, 2023) (finding the mere risk of COVID-19 infection was too speculative to serve as an extraordinary and compelling medical circumstance); *United States v. Williams*, No. GLR-97-355, 2023 WL 8019023, at *4 (D. M.D. Nov. 20, 2023) (“Hypertension and high BMI were not sufficient to warrant a prisoner’s relief when the BOP facility’s COVID-19 numbers were low, and the inmate did not show that he would not receive appropriate treatment if he were to contract the virus.”).

455 F. Supp. 3d at 290) (“[A] prisoner cannot satisfy his burden of proof by simply citing to nationwide COVID-19 statistics, asserting generalized statements on conditions of confinement within the BOP . . .”).

Further, the increased risk from an outbreak or emergency must exist at the time relief would be granted. The Sentencing Commission drafted this section using words that convey the necessary, continuous nature of the risk—“at imminent risk of being affected,” “ongoing outbreak,” “ongoing public health emergency,” and “increased risk of suffering.” U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(1)(D). As applied to COVID-19, this is no longer the case: both international and domestic health authorities, including the World Health Organization,⁴ the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,⁵ and the U.S. Federal Government,⁶ have made clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has ended.⁷ Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic no longer constitutes an “extraordinary and compelling reason” for compassionate release.

B. Defendant’s age (U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(2))

There are three requirements for the defendant’s age to constitute an extraordinary and compelling reason for release. First, the defendant must be “at least 65 years old.” U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(2). Second, they must be “experiencing a serious deterioration in physical or mental

⁴ *Statement on the Fifteenth Meeting of the IHR (2005) Emergency Committee on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, WORLD HEALTH ORG. (May 5, 2023), [https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic) [<https://perma.cc/MR64-X7UV>].

⁵ End of the Federal COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE) Declaration, Ctrs. for Disease Control & Prevention (May 5, 2023), <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/end-of-phe.html#:~:text=The%20federal%20COVID-19%20PHE,share%20certain%20data%20will%20change> [<https://perma.cc/3S43-2VNT>].

⁶ *See* National Emergencies Act, PL 118-3, April 10, 2023, 137 Stat 6.

⁷ *See also United States v. Ford*, No. 1:16-CR-19, 2023 WL 3477168, at *5 (N.D. Ind. May 15, 2023) (noting that “on May 11, 2023, the federal government ended the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency based on widespread prevention and control measures like vaccination”) (quotations omitted).

health because of the aging process.” *Id.* Third, the defendant must have “served at least 10 years or 75 percent of his or her term of imprisonment, whichever is less.” *Id.*

C. Defendant’s family circumstances (U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(3))

The Sentencing Commission enumerates four potential reasons for a defendant’s family circumstances to constitute an extraordinary and compelling reason for release:

- (A) The death or incapacitation of the caregiver of the defendant’s minor child or the defendant’s child who is 18 years of age or older and incapable of self-care because of a mental or physical disability or a medical condition.
- (B) The incapacitation of the defendant’s spouse or registered partner when the defendant would be the only available caregiver for the spouse or registered partner.
- (C) The incapacitation of the defendant’s parent when the defendant would be the only available caregiver for the parent.
- (D) The defendant establishes that circumstances similar to those listed in paragraphs (3)(A) through (3)(C) exist involving any other immediate family member or an individual whose relationship with the defendant is similar in kind to that of an immediate family member, when the defendant would be the only available caregiver for such family member or individual. For purposes of this provision, “*immediate family member*” refers to any of the individuals listed in paragraphs (3)(A) through (3)(C) as well as a grandchild, grandparent, or sibling of the defendant.

U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(3)(A)–(D).

Conclusory assertions that the defendant must now serve as the primary caretaker for a family member are insufficient. *See, e.g., United States v. Newman*, No. CR 122-031, 2024 WL 812041, at *2 (S.D. Ga. Feb. 27, 2024) (finding unsupported assertions that defendant’s wife was disabled and that his father required caretaking were “conclusory statements” that were “insufficient to carry his burden of persuasion”). Rather, courts require specific evidence of the defendant’s need to serve as a primary caretaker. For example, the defendant must prove with medical support that the family member is incapacitated. *See United States v. Zermeno*,

No. 1:16-CR-79(1), 2024 WL 4043445, at *4 (E.D. Tex. Sept. 3, 2024) (collecting cases); *United States v. Romano*, 707 F. Supp. 3d 233, 237–38 (E.D.N.Y. 2023) (finding that “[w]ithout medical evidence” of the “father’s incapacitation and medical evidence detailing [defendant’s] mother’s inability to provide his father the necessary assistance, the Court cannot conclude that [the mother] would be an inadequate caregiver.”). Statements that a family member is elderly and needs care are insufficient. *Id.* The defendant must also demonstrate why they are the only available caregiver for that family member. *United States v. Lopez*, No. 23-50404, 2024 WL 244935, at *1 (5th Cir. Jan. 23, 2024) (noting that the defendant “failed to explain why his other siblings could not care for his parents”). There must be a reason for the change in that family member’s caretaker status. *Id.* (noting the defendant’s failure to “allege the death or incapacitation of any current caretaker”).

When the caretaking role relates to minors like children, additional requirements apply. For instance, the defendant must show that they would likely gain custody of the child if released. *See, e.g., Zermeno*, 2024 WL 4043445, at *5 (collecting cases). In such a situation, the court should evaluate whether “release of the inmate to care for the inmate’s child is the best interest of the child.” U.S. Dep’t of Just., Fed. Bureau of Prisons, Program Statement 5050.50 (Jan. 17, 2019).

D. Victim of abuse (U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(4))

Under this section, the defendant must establish that, while in custody, they were a victim of (1) “sexual abuse involving a ‘sexual act,’ as defined in 18 U.S.C. § 2246(2)” or (2) “physical abuse resulting in ‘serious bodily injury,’ as defined in the Commentary to § 1B1.1.” U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(4)(A)–(B). The abuse must have been inflicted by either a correctional officer, employee, or contractor of the BOP, or “any other individual who had custody or control over the defendant.” *Id.* § 1B1.13(b)(4). Finally, the alleged misconduct “must be established by a conviction in a criminal case, a finding or admission of liability in a civil case, or a finding in an

administrative proceeding” *Id.* But if such proceedings are unduly delayed or the defendant faces imminent danger, a formal adjudication is unnecessary. *Id.*

E. Other reasons (U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(5))

The “other reasons” category is a catchall that allows the defendant to “present[] any other circumstance or combination of circumstances” that is “similar in gravity to” the four extraordinary and compelling reasons described in U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(1)–(4). *Id.* § 1B1.13(b)(5). Although some courts invoked this provision to grant COVID-19-related compassionate release motions, this reasoning no longer applies because the pandemic is over. *See supra* notes 4–7 and accompanying text.

F. Unusually long sentences (U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(6))

A defendant must meet three requirements under this section. First, the defendant must be serving an unusually long sentence. *See* U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(6). Second, they must have served at least ten years of that sentence. *Id.* Third, there must have been a change in law that “produce[s] a gross disparity between the sentence being served and the sentence likely to be imposed at the time the motion is filed.” *Id.* This section explicitly excludes non-retroactive changes “to the Guidelines Manual.” *Id.* And Fifth Circuit precedent precludes considering non-retroactive changes in *any* law. *United States v. Austin*, No. 24-30039, 2025 WL 78706, at *3 (5th Cir. Jan. 13, 2024) (“A non-retroactive change in the law cannot constitute an extraordinary and compelling reason justifying sentence reduction under § 3582(c)(1).”). Thus, in this Circuit, non-retroactive changes are irrelevant.

IV. The 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a) Factors

Section 3553(a) directs courts to consider the following factors: the nature and circumstances of the offense and the defendant’s history and characteristics; the need to reflect

the seriousness of the offense, to promote respect for the law, and to provide just punishment for the offense; the need to deter criminal conduct; the need to protect the public; the need to provide the defendant with needed educational or vocational training, medical care, or other correctional treatment in the most effective manner; the kinds of sentences and sentencing ranges established for defendants with similar characteristics under applicable United States Sentencing Guidelines provisions and policy statements; any pertinent policy statement of the United States Sentencing Commission in effect on the date of sentencing; the need to avoid unwarranted disparities among similar defendants; and the need to provide restitution to the victim. *Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *3 n.7 (citing 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a)).

Importantly, the district court has broad discretion in considering these factors. As the Supreme Court has explained, “the ‘sentencing judge is in a superior position to find facts and judge their import under § 3553(a) in the individual case’” *United States v. Rollins*, 53 F.4th 353, 359 (5th Cir. 2022) (quoting *Gall v. United States*, 552 U.S. 38, 51 (2007)). Consistent with the broad discretion granted district courts, the Fifth Circuit has “regularly affirmed the denial of a compassionate-release motion . . . where the district court’s weighing of the Section 3553(a) factors can independently support its judgment.” *Id.* at 358 (citation omitted). In short, “compassionate release is discretionary, not mandatory, and could be refused after weighing the sentencing factors of 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a).” *United States v. Chambliss*, 948 F.3d 691, 693 (5th Cir. 2020).

V. The Defendant’s Burden

In sum, when seeking compassionate release on their own motion, the defendant must demonstrate that: (1) the defendant exhausted administrative remedies; (2) “extraordinary and compelling reasons” justify the defendant’s sentence reduction or the defendant satisfies the

requirements of § 3582(c)(1)(A)(ii);⁸ (3) the reduction is consistent with the policy statement of U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13; and (4) the court should exercise its discretion to grant the motion after considering the § 3553(a) factors. *Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *4 (citing *United States v. Jackson*, 27 F.4th 1088, 1089 (5th Cir. 2022); *Shkambi*, 993 F.3d at 392; *United States v. Rollins*, 53 F.4th 353, 358 (5th Cir. 2022)).

ANALYSIS

I. Defendant has met § 3582 (c)(1)(A)’s exhaustion requirement.

As a threshold matter, the Court will first address the exhaustion requirement. Forty days before filing this Motion, Defendant submitted a request to his facility’s warden to file for compassionate release (Dkt. #45-1 at p. 1). This request was not acknowledged (Dkt. #45 at p. 4). Thus, Defendant has satisfied the exhaustion requirement because his administrative request preceded his motion by more than thirty days. *See Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *4 (citing 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A)).

II. Defendant has not met § 3582(c)(1)(A)’s requirement that “extraordinary and compelling reasons” warrant a sentence reduction.

A. Defendant’s Constitutional Challenge to § 922(g)(3) is not cognizable.

Turning to Defendant’s Motion, Defendant contends that if his case were tried today, he would not be convicted of Count One due to recent decisions in the Fifth Circuit that have found 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(3) unconstitutional in certain circumstances (Dkt. #46-1 at pp. 1-2) (citing *United States v. Connelly*, 117 F.4th 269 (5th Cir. 2024)) (finding § 922(g)(3) unconstitutional

⁸ 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A)(ii) states that “the defendant is at least 70 years of age, has served at least 30 years in prison, pursuant to a sentence imposed under section 3559(c), for the offense or offenses for which the defendant is currently imprisoned, and a determination has been made by the Director of the [BOP] that the defendant is not a danger to the safety of any other person or the community, as provided under section 3142(g).”

under the Second Amendment as applied to the facts of that case). He argues that § 922(g)(3) as applied to this case is unconstitutional because it “burdens conduct protected by the Second Amendment” (Dkt. #46-1 at pp. 1-2). Thus, according to Defendant, “under current law . . . he would not be convicted on Count One” (Dkt. #46-1 at pp. 1-2). In response the Government contends that *United States v. Escajeda* articulates the governing procedural principle for a defendant to raise a Constitutional challenge to his conviction (Dkt. #51 at pp. 2-3) (citing 58 F.4th 184 (5th Cir. 2023)).

The Court agrees with the Government that Defendant cannot raise a Constitutional challenge to his conviction through a motion for compassionate release. In *Escajeda*, the Fifth Circuit held that “a prisoner cannot use § 3582(c) to challenge the legality or the duration of his sentence; such arguments can, and hence must, be raised under Chapter 153 [of Title 28],” providing “specific avenues for post-conviction relief that permit prisoners to challenge the legality of their confinement in federal court.” *Escajeda*, 58 F.4th at 186-87. The Fifth Circuit emphasized that § 3582(c) contrasts with other statutes that explicitly allow prisoners to challenge their confinement’s legality. *Id.* at 186. The absence of such language in § 3582(c) confirms that a motion for compassionate release is not the proper vehicle for constitutional challenges to convictions. *Id.*

Compassionate release is limited to situations where the defendant can show “extraordinary and compelling reasons” justifying a sentence reduction. 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A). It does not empower courts to revisit the validity of a conviction or the constitutionality of a statute. *Escajeda*, 58 F.4th at 186-87 (citing *Wilkinson v. Dotson*, 544 U.S. 74, 81 (2005)) (describing habeas as the “exclusive” remedy for challenging the lawfulness of

imprisonment). Thus, even assuming *Connelly* casts doubt on the constitutionality of Defendant's conviction under § 922(g)(3), Fifth Circuit precedent forecloses raising that issue through a motion for compassionate release. *Id.* at 187. Accordingly, Defendant's Constitutional arguments are misplaced because he cannot raise those arguments in a motion for compassionate release.

B. Sentencing disparity under § 1B1.13(b)(6) is inapplicable due to the time served requirement.

Alternatively, Defendant invokes U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(6) to argue that changes in law create a sentencing disparity (Dkt. #53 at p. 3). However, the language of this section prevents his argument from succeeding. The section provides:

(6) UNUSUALLY LONG SENTENCE—If a defendant received an unusually long sentence and *has served at least 10 years of the term of imprisonment*, a change in the law (other than an amendment to the Guidelines Manual that has not been made retroactive) may be considered in determining whether the defendant presents an extraordinary and compelling reason, but only where such change would produce a gross disparity between the sentence being served and the sentence likely to be imposed at the time the motion is filed, and after full consideration of the defendant's individualized circumstances.

U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(6) (emphasis added). The Court can only consider a sentencing discrepancy if the Defendant has served at least ten years of imprisonment. *United States v. Aguilar-Cardenas*, No. 4:14-cr-81, 2025 WL 1748059, at *7–8 (E.D. Tex. June 24, 2025); *United States v. Broadus*, No. 3:10-CR-0183-B-1, 2025 WL 963074, at *3 (N.D. Tex. Mar. 31, 2025) (citing U.S.S.G. § 1B1.13(b)(6)). Defendant has not served ten years (Dkt. #43 at p. 1). Thus, § 1B1.13(b)(6) expressly limits such relief to defendants who have served at least 10 years, a threshold Defendant does not meet (Dkt. #44 at p. 2).

C. Defendant's arguments based on clemency, self-defense, and drug quantity do not establish extraordinary and compelling reasons.

Defendant argues additional bases for extraordinary and compelling reasons related to his conviction on Count Two, the 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1) conviction. First, Defendant refers to former

President Biden’s presidential proclamations dealing with clemency for federal inmates for simple marijuana possession (Dkt. #45 at p. 4). *See Statement from President Biden on Marijuana Reform*, The White House (Oct. 6, 2022), <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2022/10/06/statement-from-president-biden-on-marijuana-reform/>. These proclamations are not applicable to Defendant as he was not convicted of simple marijuana possession (*See* Dkt. #43). Rather, he was charged with, and convicted of, possessing a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime, in violation of 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1) (Dkt. #36 at ¶ 7).

Second, Defendant argues that his sentence should be reduced because he discharged the firearm in self-defense (Dkt. #46-1 at pp. 3-4). He asserts that the statutory minimum for possessing or brandishing a firearm under § 924(c)(1)(A)(i)–(ii) is less severe than the 120-month minimum he received under § 924(c)(1)(A)(iii) (Dkt. #46-1 at p. 4). This argument is unavailing. Binding Supreme Court precedent states that section 924(c)(1)(A)(iii) imposes a mandatory minimum sentence when a firearm is discharged in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime, regardless of whether the discharge was on purpose, in self-defense, or by accident. *See Dean v. United States*, 556 U.S. 568, 577 (2009). 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1)(A)(iii) provides that “[i]f the firearm is discharged, [the defendant shall] be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 10 years.” The dispositive fact is the discharge of the firearm in furtherance of the crime, which Defendant admitted in his guilty plea (Dkt. #36 at ¶ 7). *Id.* The section does not contain any exception for the discharge of a firearm in self-defense and courts have consistently applied the statutory minimum even where the discharge was not intentional. *Id.* (holding that the ten-year mandatory minimum under 18 U.S.C. § 924(c)(1)(A)(iii) applies when a firearm is discharged during a violent or drug trafficking crime, regardless of whether the discharge was intentional or

accidental). Thus, Defendant's admissions establish his guilt on the § 924(c) charge in Count Two (Dkt. #36 at ¶ 7).

Third, Defendant argues that his 120-month statutory minimum sentence is excessive (Dkt. #46-1 at p. 3). He bases this claim on the fact that the drug involved was marijuana and the quantity he intended to distribute was less than that of other inmates (Dkt. #46-1 at p. 3). This argument falls short due to the language of § 924(c). The statute does not distinguish between the type or quantity of the illegal substance, but rather whether the firearm used during the drug trafficking offense was discharged. § 924(c)(1)(A) ("any person who, during and in relation to *any* crime of violence or *drug trafficking crime* . . . uses or carries a firearm, or whom in furtherance of any such crime, possesses a firearm, shall, in addition to the punishment provided for such crime of violence or *drug trafficking crime*—if the firearm is discharged, be sentenced to a term of imprisonment of not less than 10 years") (emphasis added). The language of § 924(c) imposes a mandatory minimum based solely on firearm discharge, not drug type or quantity. *Id.*

II. The 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a) factors do not support Defendant's Motion for Compassionate Release.

Finally, even if "extraordinary and compelling" reasons existed, the sentencing factors under 18 U.S.C. § 3553(a) support denying Defendant's Motion. The conduct underlying Defendant's convictions was serious and violent. Defendant admitted in his plea to possessing and discharging a firearm in furtherance of a drug trafficking crime (Dkt. #36 at ¶¶ 6–7). The record shows that the offense occurred when other individuals attempted to rob Defendant while he tried to illegally sell them marijuana (Dkt. #37 at ¶ 6). At some point during the attempted robbery, Defendant recklessly discharged a firearm and killed someone (Dkt. #37 at ¶ 6). This level of violence weighs against early release. *See Wilson*, 2024 WL 4267923, at *8–10; *United States v.*

Sentmore, No. 02-26, 2021 WL 1172540, at *3 (E.D. La. Mar. 29, 2021). Defendant's involvement in a drug trafficking operation coupled with firearm use demonstrates a clear risk to community safety. *United States v. Estrada*, No. 2:08-cr-00489, 2021 WL 1929830, at *2 (S.D. Tex. May 13, 2021). The original 144-month sentence imposed was calibrated to reflect the severity of the Defendant's conduct, including the mandatory consecutive sentence under 18 U.S.C. § 924(c) (Dkt. #43 at p. 1). The sentence imposed is consistent with the Sentencing Guidelines and appropriate for offenses of this nature and severity. Accordingly, the Court finds that Defendant's Motion for Compassionate Release should be denied.

CONCLUSION

It is therefore **ORDERED** that Defendant's Motion for Sentence Reduction Under 18 U.S.C. § 3582(c)(1)(A) (Dkt. #45) is hereby **DENIED**.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

SIGNED this 6th day of August, 2025.


AMOS L. MAZZANT
UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGE